

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dominy

When Emma Dominy, writhing and shrieking, finally evicted her son Floyd, the doctors dumped him on a scale and whistled. Floyd Elgin Dominy, ten pounds, four ounces, at birth. Floyd Elgin Dominy, larger than life. All of Floyd's siblings were born huge. His brother Ralph weighed twelve pounds. Emma's six giant babies were a cross she was to bear through the rest of her life. Her uterus became distended, causing her horrid pain. She developed a nervous condition. Her temper became explosive, her outbursts hysterical. Strong-willed, French-Irish, and beautiful, Emma May Dominy was a handful anyway. Charles Dominy and his wife fought day and night. They had what is referred to as a "difficult" marriage, cemented precariously by children, religion, and a pious wheatbelt condemnation of divorce. Life, remembers Floyd, was like living on an earthquake fault. There was never any peace. "They fussed and fumed from morning to night. We'd lie awake at night and listen to them tearing into each other." He is seventy when he says this, but his childhood is still a bad memory; you can read it in the turned-down corners of his mouth. "I remember what a relief it was to get away from home. It bugged me right through college. When everyone else was having nightmares about missing exams, I was having nightmares that my parents were murdering each other."

Hastings, Nebraska, is a long way from paradise: Libya in the summer, Siberia in the winter; too wet for the Bureau of Reclamation, too arid for trees. Hard up against the hundredth meridian, Hastings occupies America's agricultural DMZ. Neither God nor government

has taken it under its wing. Disaster is Hastings's stock-in-trade—that and dullness. "The capriciousness of nature is the one thing that livens that place up," says Dominy. "When they aren't talking crop prices or tattling on their neighbors, all anyone talks about is the weather." Hastings is tornado country (one of the few double-funneled tornadoes ever seen was photographed near there), baseball-size-hail country, banshee blizzard country, drought-without-end country. The region's whole economy can be drained by a summer's drought, dashed by an afternoon's hailstorm. The anarchy of nature may be one reason why most of Hastings's residents—Republican or Democrat, dry farmer or irrigation farmer, city dweller or country dweller—devoutly believe that man should exercise as much dominion over the earth as he can. Hastings, Nebraska: birthplace of Floyd Dominy, future Commissioner of Reclamation.

Floyd was headstrong and impulsive—"an independent cuss from the beginning." He was an above-average but somewhat uninterested student, and his intelligence was more obvious than evident in his grades. His distinguishing characteristic was self-reliance. Floyd had great confidence in himself. At the age of eleven, he could manhandle a neighbor's two-thousand-pound Belgian draft horses as if they were a pair of pygmy ponies. He fixed things, ran things, organized things. Other children respected and feared him. To most children, the home is a refuge from a dangerous world; in Floyd's case, it was the other way around. Compared to home, shadowed by gloom and rumbling with thunder, the world was a sunlit place.

"I always felt there was a contradiction between my parents' fussing and fuming and their Christian piety," he says. "It seemed inconsistent to me. As a boy, I was very moral. I was president of my Sunday school class. I thought money was the root of evil. If someone had offered me a job paying \$300 a year for life, I would have taken it. When I first married Alice, I made her take off her lipstick if we went out for the evening.

"I'm an enigma, even to myself."

At seventeen, Floyd fell in love. Her name was Alice Criswell. She was sweet, demure, and very pretty, a little heroine out of Willa Cather. They met at a state convention; he was Master Counsellor for the Order of DeMolay, and she was the Queen of Job's Daughters. Alice's family lived in western Nebraska, near Chappell, a good two hundred miles away. Floyd was mad for her, but his father refused to let him borrow the car. Floyd had \$30 to his name. He spent \$25 of it on a beat-up

one-cylinder motorcycle that, with luck, would take him to Alice. "It was a helluva trip out there. The roads were all dirt in those days. I wore out a pair of boots balancing that one-lunger, but I made it. When I got ready to go back home, the damn thing wouldn't fire up. Alice's father looked at it and said, 'Your magneto's shot.' I said, 'Can we fix it?' He spent two hours trying, but the sonofabitch was beyond repair. I had to sell it for what I could get, which was five bucks, and start hitchhiking home. Hitchhike, hell. You hardly saw a car in western Nebraska in those days. I'd walked about three miles when I came upon an old guy with his head stuck under the hood of his truck. I said, 'What's the matter?' and I looked in and saw that *his* magneto was shot. Well, in the last two hours I'd learned about magnetos. I took his apart, saw right away what was wrong with it, and fixed it then and there. That old geezer was so impressed that he offered me a job on the spot. I never went home again."

Floyd and Alice married secretly in Georgia, where Floyd had gone after two years at Hastings College to work on a gas pipeline being built across the South. They spent their three-day honeymoon in Florida. Floyd signed in ahead for three days of work and they took off. A supervisor, his heart warmed by a young couple in love, covered for him. "I was nineteen," Floyd says. "I think that was the first lie I ever told in my life."

When his stint in Atlanta was up, Floyd and Alice went back to Hastings. For \$15 a week, he drove a truck between Hastings and Lincoln. Driving anything—a team of horses—was a dream job to many a farm boy, but Floyd found it excruciatingly dull. "I finally said to myself, 'Hell, \$15 a week is nothing. I'll go out to western Nebraska with Alice.' I got myself a job on Fred Smith's place. Man, that was a badly run operation. They had new weeding tractors and their wheat fields were still being run over by weeds. They only ran the tractors during the daytime—they were too lazy to run them at night. This land was dry-farmed, and those weeds were using precious rainfall that was needed by the wheat. There were lights on the tractors. They should have been running the goddamned machines twenty-four hours a day. So I finally said, 'This is a helluva way to run a farm!' Fred Smith thought I was quite an upstart. He said to me, 'How would you run it?' and I said, 'I'll show you.' I climbed on one of those tractors and I ran it till ten o'clock at night. Then I went to bed, got up at three in the morning, and finished the job by four the next afternoon. Cleared out every weed on that farm. I was hell-for-leather. I didn't stop to take a leak. Old Fred Smith came up to me later as I was changing

clothes and said, 'With that kind of drive, you're wasting yourself. You ought to go back to college.'"

The sensible thing for a mechanically gifted farm boy who didn't particularly like farming to major in was engineering. At Hastings College, Dominy had given it a brief go and quit. "I didn't like the preciseness," he says. In 1930, he entered the University of Wyoming at Laramie, choosing economics as a major. He was captain of the hockey team. He stayed on and won a master's degree in 1933. By then the country's economy was in a screaming nosedive and the West was five years into the Great Drought. The ranchers around Laramie couldn't sell their cattle—first because no one had money to buy them, second because the cattle weren't worth buying anyway. They were thirsty and starving, vacant-eyed beasts with bellies bloated from hunger and protruding ribs. Stupefied by the intensity of the disaster, Wyoming's people were in the same condition, mentally if not physically. Campbell County, two hundred miles north of Laramie, was typical of the places that had plummeted through FDR's safety net of relief. Roosevelt couldn't launch a federal dam project there because Campbell County had no river worth a dam. It had no highway project because no one went there and it hardly had cars. It had no writers' projects, no hospital projects, no dog census. All it had was the cattle liquidation program. The Agriculture Department's county agent paid the ranchers \$8 a head for their scrawny cattle, then shot them. The farmers took the \$8 and spent it on horse feed and rifle shells, then headed into the uplands in search of deer and rabbits. During the Depression, Campbell County reverted substantially to the hunter-gatherer existence of the Crow and northern Cheyenne who had forfeited the territory. The two things it had going for it were reasonably abundant herds of game and the county agent, Floyd Dominy.

At eleven o'clock one morning in the spring of 1980, Dominy, floating on three gin and juices and powered by two cigars, was in a mood to talk about his Campbell County days. "We had a drought, grasshoppers, crickets. I tell you it was something else. It looked as if nothing could live. Under the federal regulations, five thousand cattle were to be bought in the whole state of Wyoming. Fifty thousand were dying in Campbell County alone. I called up Washington and said, 'This is worse than you can believe. Send me another vet, dammit.' They sent me three vets. That got me some attention. The range improvement program, though, really put me on the map. That took creativity and force. The government was paying farmers fifteen cents a cubic yard to move dirt. Hell, I wasn't going to pay fifteen cents if it cost ten. I

said to those ranchers, 'I'm gonna pay you cost—nothing more.' Naturally, they bellyached. But with my relief allotment stretched further I could build a lot more dams."

Campbell County is drier than crisp toast, but it does get some rain. There are mountains around that produce orographic clouds, and some of them produce rain—not much, but enough to make it worth trying to store the runoff that occasionally pours down the creeks. "I said to myself, 'It's stupid to let a drop of that stuff escape. We've got to capture that water.' I'd take these ranchers out to where I wanted them to build a dam, some godawful-looking dry creek somewhere, and they'd say, 'A dam's no good. There's no water to take.' And I'd say, 'Goddamn it, a ten-minute downpour in this devegetated moonscape and you'll see a nice little surge come through here.' The one good thing about Wyoming is there's not enough groundcover to soak up the rain where it falls. I said to the farmers, 'You capture that water and at least your cows won't die of thirst. You get a little extra for irrigation and you can grow some grass on it. What do you want to do—just sit here and starve?'

"So I got them building dams. I practiced myself with a little four-horsepower Fresno scraper. The county surveyor and I developed our own set of regulations. We said it's got to have ten-foot width and five feet of freeboard. The federal regulations said the Soil Conservation man had to approve the damsite. The Forest Service guy was supposed to have his say-so, too. I said to hell with it. I cut all that red tape. The extension director and the Wyoming dean of agriculture finally got wind of what I was up to. They said to me, 'Floyd, you can't *do* that. You've got to play by the *rules*.' I said, 'The Democrats would have a really black eye if they announce a program that doesn't work.'"

Dominy took a swig of gin and juice, leaned back in his black easy chair, and chuckled. "That was the end of 'prior approval.' Henry Wallace took the phrase right out of the law.

"We built three hundred dams in my county. That was more than in the whole rest of the West. I was a one-man Bureau of Reclamation. We were moving! I was twenty-four years old, and I was king. Campbell County was my demesne. They still talk about me out there. I saved a lot of cattle from dying and a lot of farmers from going on relief. After that, I started getting job offers from Washington. But I had already psychoanalyzed myself as a strong starter who got bored easily. I figured I'd have to watch that if I wanted to succeed in life. So I had made up my mind to stay in Campbell County five years."

For Floyd and Alice, the first two and a half years in Campbell

County meant a life-style a cut above that of his ancestors when they arrived in Nebraska in 1873. They lived in a stone dugout built into a hillside; they had a gasoline lantern and a coal-burning stove, but no windows. "The place had been abandoned for thirty years. It was vandalized. The house had a leaning chimney and big holes in the floor. I was being paid \$130 a month, plus five cents a mile for the car. The guy who owned the hovel was named Mr. Bartles. He was as bald as a billiard ball. I said, 'What's the rent?' He said, 'You're crazy wanting to live there in the first place. I'm not going to let you live there *and* charge you rent.'"

Dominy didn't quite achieve his goal of staying five years in Campbell County; he finally succumbed to an offer from the Agricultural Adjustment Administration to help administer the nation's increasingly complex farm program, working as a field agent for the western states. In 1942, he transferred to the Inter-American Affairs Bureau, working under Nelson Rockefeller. The war effort demanded immense quantities of bauxite, rubber, and cinchona, most of it coming out of the Caribbean and South America. Tens of thousands of miners and loggers were dumped in the middle of the jungle without enough to eat. Instant farms became Dominy's specialty. He set them up in nine Central and South American countries, and, later, on the islands of Saipan, Tinian, Iwo Jima, and Peleliu as they were recaptured from the Japanese.

In March of 1946, Dominy was back from the Pacific. Reviewing his career on a homebound ship, he decided that nothing had been as satisfying as building all those dams in Campbell County. It was one thing to hack a farm out of a jungle clearing—that was brutal and monotonous work, requiring neither brains nor talent. It was quite another thing to build a dam, store the water, and make the desert bloom. That, in a small way, was changing the order of the universe. On the same day he returned to Washington, Dominy went to a phone booth and put in a call to the Bureau of Reclamation. He had a job in three hours.

As a land-development specialist for the Bureau, Dominy proved his mettle quickly. His experience helped, as did his prodigious energy, but Dominy also had something a great many of the Bureau's engineers lacked—a knack with people. "It was two things," he says. "First, I cared about making these projects work. The engineers would build the dam and the irrigation features and walk away from it. They felt the projects were supposed to work out by themselves. When I got there, we had projects failing all over the place. The Bureau would

send a threat out to the farmers to shape up, then forget about them for five years. No one took us seriously. Well, by God, they took *me* seriously. I was tough, but they saw I cared about their problems. That was number two. I proved myself right away. One of our early projects in big trouble was Milk River in Montana. The regional director, Ken Vernon, had revised the repayment contract under political pressure and it was a complete giveaway. I had moved up to Allocation and Repayment then, and I sent him a blistering letter about it. Vernon was several ranks above me and he couldn't believe it. He called up Goodrich Lineweaver, my superior, and made himself hoarse chewing him out. 'Who is this goddamned upstart?' Lineweaver thought he could put me in my place by sending me to negotiate a better deal. He was sure I'd fail. So I went out to Montana. I saw these old farmers lined up in a room like a country church. They were hostile as hell. I demanded that tables and chairs be brought in. I gave them all pencils and a scratch pad and something to drink. Now they could put their feet under something, light up a smoke, and we could have a serious goddamn discussion. We got a whole new package out of this."

Floyd Dominy's rise to power in the Bureau of Reclamation was astonishingly fast. From dirt sampler to waterlord of the American West took just thirteen years, and he might as well have been commissioner during the last three. Like a chess master, Dominy leaped and checked his way to the top, going from Land Development to an entirely different branch, Allocation and Repayment, then sidelong to Operation and Maintenance, then to the Irrigation Division, and finally to assistant, associate, and full commissioner. His strategy was simple. He would settle in a branch with a weak man as chief and learn as fast as he could. Then he would flap up to the ledge occupied by the chief and knock him off. The first to go was Bill Palmer, who headed Allocation and Repayment and was there largely because he was a Mormon and had an influential constituency. "Mike Straus was totally unsatisfied with Palmer," says Dominy, "so I told Lineweaver that they ought to replace him with me. He said, 'I can't do that.' I said, 'Well, what *can* you do?' Lineweaver said, 'We can make you acting director and not tell Palmer about it.' I said, 'How long acting?' He said, 'Well, I don't know, until we can work something out.' I said, 'Let's make it sixty days.' Lineweaver mumbled and grumbled, 'I don't know, Floyd, that's awfully short.' I said, 'It's long for me.' Well, I got him to agree. There I was, 'acting director,' and Palmer doesn't even know it. The first thing he does is start making a fuss about having to train me, because he'd just trained some other guy. So I walked into

his office late one day and said, 'Bill, I think you've got a bad attitude. I hear you've been complaining about having to train me. Well, you don't have to. Dominy can train Dominy.' He looked up at me and said, 'What do you mean by that, Floyd?' I looked him *cold* in the eye and said, 'I mean I'm about to run this division, Bill. It's you or me, and I can guarantee you it's going to be me. So maybe what you ought to do is request a transfer. Maybe you should go out West.' " Mimicking his tone of voice then, Dominy sounds like a Mafia shakedown artist running a recalcitrant store owner out of the neighborhood. "Well, he took my cue. Next thing I know Bill Palmer is requesting a move to Sacramento and I'm chief of Allocation and Repayment. It took exactly sixty days, just like I said. I brought him back, though. Ultimately, I made him an assistant commissioner. Bill was a good man."

In his new position, Dominy had an opportunity to learn anything he wanted about the three-hundred-odd Reclamation projects in existence. He read every project history, reserving for special attention the "bad elements"—the projects that were failing. "Half of our projects were insolvent. I was fascinated: why some and not others? I said to myself, 'Whoever figures this out and starts to haul Reclamation out of this financial ooze is going to be the next commissioner.' The reasons were complicated. In the early days, Reclamation made some bad mistakes—we miscalculated water availability, we laid out canals that didn't work right, we had drainage problems that we should have anticipated. Soil, altitude, crop prices, markets—they all made a difference. On top of that, there were practically no requirements. Straus and Warne let any idiot get into a Reclamation project. You didn't have to demonstrate that you had capital, farming skills, anything. Any fool could sign up and get on a Reclamation farm and use whatever intelligence he had cheating the government. When the projects began to go bankrupt, Straus and Warne were afraid to expose them. They covered the goddamn things up and that got us in a hell of a lot of trouble with Congress. We were illegally delivering water all over the place. Payments were way in arrears and no one was doing a damn thing about it. I think we were violating the law at least as often as we were not violating it."

Dominy approached the problem in a somewhat schizophrenic way. Privately, he was appalled by the lassitude of the Reclamation program, by the indifference of the engineers to its problems, and by the hypocrisy of members of Congress who voted for bad projects as special favors to colleagues and then griped about the money they

were losing. At the same time, he was, in public, the program's most belligerent defender after Mike Straus. His defenses were so eloquent he even came to believe them himself.

Once a prominent Senator from South Dakota, Chan Gurney, sent Straus a copy of an article that was witheringly critical of the Belle Fourche Project in his own state, implying that he agreed with it. For years, Belle Fourche had been perhaps the Bureau's preeminent fiasco. Streamflow calculations and reservoir carryover capacity were based on nine months of gauging during a wet year; when the drought of the 1930s came, the reservoir was dry within months. No investigation had been made of the need for drainage, which was turning out to be a terrific problem the farmers could not begin to pay to solve. Farmers settling the project were not selected on the basis of character, aptitude, or available capital, and the vast majority of them were bankrupt within a few years. Even with the Bureau forgiving almost all their obligations, many of the farmers were going broke. They were still receiving water, however, so the project was technically in violation of the law. Congressmen hostile to the Reclamation program loved to crucify Belle Fourche at appropriations time; it was like stoning a flightless auk. Even blustery Mike Straus was going to send Gurney a milquetoast letter in response. When he reread the draft that had been prepared by an aide, however, he couldn't bear to do it. So Dominy volunteered.

Of course the project was in deep trouble, Dominy wrote. It was planned at the turn of the century, one of the first large-scale irrigation ventures since the Fertile Crescent. There was hardly any experience to go on. Records of North America's climate scarcely existed. But it was *Congress*, not the Bureau, that had been especially anxious to get the Reclamation program underway—that was the main reason Belle Fourche was undertaken on such a paucity of data. It was *Congress*, not the Bureau, that had established impossibly short repayment periods, that had failed to appropriate funds for demonstration projects. It was *Congress* that demanded projects in areas where the value of agriculture wasn't worth the cost of irrigation, making subsidies inevitable. The point was the project was there. Thousands of South Dakotans depended on it; they had helped feed the country when the state's dryland farmers were utterly ruined. What would the Senator do? Shut it down? Tear down the dam? Kick defaulting farmers off their lands and onto the relief rolls? Or would he help the Bureau come up with solutions to put the Reclamation program on a sound foundation? After all, if anyone was embarrassed by the Belle Fourche Project, it was the Bureau. Did the Senator believe that the greatest

amalgamation of professional talent in the government was *glad* when its projects became financial disasters? "Straus read that letter and loved it so much he read it twice again," Dominy chuckled. "He didn't change one word. I was in thick with him from that point on. We really blew smoke up that Senator's ass."

Dominy had the instincts of a first-rate miler. He could pace himself beautifully, moving on the margin of recklessness but always with power in reserve. He knew when to cut off a runner, when to throw an elbow, when to sprint. He also knew that there was nothing like a grudge to make him run harder.

If Dominy harbored a lifelong grudge, it was against engineers. Away from their drafting tables, he thought, engineers could be inexcusably stupid. On the other hand, they had a mystical ability to erect huge structures along exact lines, using bizarre formulas he could not even read. They could map a river basin, analyze some abutment rocks, measure the streamflow, and build a dam of precisely the shape, size, and structure to suit it. They had labored through the trigonometry, the calculus, the chemistry, the topology, and the geology that he had backed away from—the one time in his life he had given up on anything. The problem was, they couldn't explain their own work or its importance, couldn't understand human relations, couldn't see a political problem about to smack them in the face. He could do all of that—brilliantly. Dominy needed them, and he knew it, and they needed him—and didn't know it. It made him furious. In the mid-1950s, after mastering Operation and Maintenance and Repayment and Irrigation, Dominy felt he should move on to the second most important job in the Bureau—the assistant commissioner for legislative liaison. He should be the one working Congress—explaining new projects, justifying the problem ones, tantalizing members with grandiose plans, horse trading, cajoling, threatening. After all, if the Republicans held to their "no new starts" policy, the Bureau would soon have nothing to do.

The position, however, had never gone to a non-engineer, and the person Commissioner Wilbur Dexheimer wanted to appoint was Ed Neilson. Dominy had warned Dexheimer about Neilson. He was, he told Dex, just like him: good-natured, somewhat bumbling, uninterested in politics, and therefore inept. Neilson was the last person who should be sent up to explain the Bureau's work to Congress. "He had already admitted that he didn't even know the names of most of the projects, and if someone mentioned one to him he wouldn't be able to say what state it was in. For Christ's sake!"

The Public Works Subcommittee of the House Appropriations

Committee, which authorized every penny the Bureau spent, had been reorganized after the 1954 election in a way that was profoundly inauspicious for the Bureau. Only two Congressmen sympathetic to Reclamation still sat on it, and one of them, Mike Kirwan, was from Ohio, whose farmers were beginning to raise hell about subsidized competition from Reclamation lands. Everyone else on the subcommittee was hostile or indifferent to the Bureau.

The Appropriations Committee hearings began in April of 1955, and, as Dominy had predicted, the roof caved in. "Dexheimer had gone off for two weeks to watch an atomic bomb test in Nevada. It was utterly inexcusable. The assistant commissioners, Neilson and Crosthwait, and the regional directors were all there, but they were the most tongue-tied bunch of engineers you ever saw. They muffed answers to the simplest questions. It was the biggest fiasco. But Neilson and Crosthwait kept telling me my presence 'wasn't required,' because the subcommittee was only allowing five witnesses to be present at one time. Actually, they were scared I would upstage them. On the tenth day, I was invited to lunch by Senator Gale McGee of Wyoming. Word was getting around about how unbelievably inept Reclamation's witnesses were, and like every other member from the West, he was concerned. He said, 'Floyd, can you do something?' See, I already had a reputation as the most knowledgeable person in the Bureau. After lunch, I called in for my messages.

"My secretary told me I'd gotten a telephone call from Neilson up on the Hill. 'He needs you desperately,' she said. I was madder than hell. I stalked into that hearing room and went up to Neilson and said, 'You got your chestnuts burned pretty good and now you want me to pull them out of the fire.' You should have seen the look on his face. He said, 'Are you being insubordinate?' I said, 'Hell, no, I'm being loyal. I'm here to save your can. But you introduce me first.'

"Rudy Walters, the regional director from Denver, was up there at that moment testifying about the Kendrick Project. I knew all about the Kendrick Project—it was in Wyoming. Rudy was totally tongue-tied. You could read the exasperation on those committee members' faces. Neilson ran up to the front of the room and said, 'Mr. Chairman, Mr. Chairman, Floyd's here.' 'Floyd's here.' No introduction, no last name, nothing. I was mad as a bull with a spear in his back, but I know how to channel anger. I walked to that witness dock and said, 'Mr. Chairman, my name is Floyd Elgin Dominy. I am not an engineer. I'd be happy to tell you about the Kendrick Project. In the first place, the Kendrick Project would never have been built if it hadn't been for Senator Kendrick. If our engineers had been left solely with the de-

cision, they probably wouldn't have built it.' That kept them from dozing off. Then I told them everything they wanted to know.

"For the first hour I was standing up, resting my hands on the chair of the official reporter. Neilson didn't even give me a goddamned seat in his pew. Then the committee wanted me to testify about some other projects, and the chairman directed Neilson to make room for me. I went on all afternoon, and they invited me right back the next day. I ended up testifying for a week. The committee publicly reprimanded the Bureau for inexcusable lack of preparedness and unwillingness to provide facts, but they specifically mentioned *Dominy* as the one exception. From then on, if a Congressman wanted to know anything about Reclamation, he came to *me*. Before long, they were asking me about the Corps of Engineers projects, too. I became the person they trusted. I wasn't afraid of any of them, either. I chased one out of my office once.

"What I did on Fred Smith's farm got me my start in life. What I did in Campbell County got me to Washington. Those hearings made me commissioner."

"I liked Floyd. I trusted him. I thought he would be loyal to me as secretary."

"I liked Stewart. He was a bad administrator, but he had marvelous instincts. He also had guts. He wouldn't bite a chainsaw, but he had guts."

"Dominy despised Stewart Udall, and Udall regarded him like a rogue elephant. Dominy used to come storming out of Udall's office and say, 'Who does he think he is?! The Commissioner of Reclamation?'"

"Dominy was the most able bureaucrat I've ever known."

"I was amazed by him. He had the constitution of a double ox. He'd be dead drunk at a party at three A.M. and he'd be testifying at eight-thirty the next morning and you couldn't tell."

"He was merciless to the people around him. He could be hell on his assistant commissioners. He was horrible to some of the regional directors. If you made a stupid mistake he was all over you and he wouldn't quit."

"When we went on tours abroad, Dominy was treated like the President of the United States."

"He was a magician with Congress. His friends there would do anything for him. They believed every word he said."

"When he testified he spouted numbers like a computer. He spoke with absolute self-assurance. It was all hogwash. If he didn't know a number, he made one up."

"When Dominy was ousted the Bureau of Reclamation fell apart. It will never recover. The disarray over there now is ridiculous."

"When you worked for Dominy you were always terrified of the page-eight syndrome. If you handed him a memorandum and page eight was missing, he'd call your supervisor and say, 'Get that asshole off the job. Put him in a hole someplace.' Guys ruined their careers because they stumbled on the rug when they entered his office."

"Basically, he was a terrorist."

"All the wives were disgusted with him. Some of them refused to come to parties when he was going to be there, because he'd start propositioning them all."

"We played a game of golf once. Floyd was a below-average golfer and I'm an above-average golfer, but he beat me with psych. On the second or third hole, I sliced a ball. He spent the rest of the game ridiculing my slice. I didn't know whether I was madder at him or at myself. He got me all worked up and nervous. Ordinarily, when one grows up and becomes successful, one learns not to let silly mistakes or ridicule become bothersome. But I was so bothered I felt like a little kid on the verge of tears. He psyched me out. He won the game."

"He was one of the best gamblers I ever saw. I was on an airplane with him once and watched him play a game of high-stakes bridge. He won \$1,200 in a couple of hours. He took the money and bought himself a tractor."

"If Dominy were commissioner today, he'd be killed."

Nominally, the Bureau of Reclamation is a part of the Interior Department. The commissioner is, in theory, directly responsible to the Interior Secretary and the President, and carries out the wishes of whatever administration occupies the White House—whether that administration appointed him or not. Actually, everyone who has watched the Bureau in action over the years knows it doesn't work that way. The Bureau is a creature of Congress, and most Presidents have not been able to control it any better than they could control the weather or the press. The role of the Bureau vis-à-vis the White House and Congress might be likened to that of a child placed in a foster home by a doting pair of unstable parents. The child may tell lies, throw tantrums, wreck the house, and eat everything in the icebox, but if his foster parents finally decide to give him a thrashing, his real parents materialize out of nowhere and wrest the paddle from their hands. Jimmy Carter lost the momentum of his presidency, and a chance at a second term, through a hapless effort to bring the Bureau and the Corps of Engineers under control. Eisenhower, Johnson, Nixon, and Ford all tried to dump or delay a number of projects the Bureau and Corps wanted to build, and failed in almost every case. Congress simply tossed the projects into omnibus public-works bills, which would have required that the President veto anything from important flood-control projects to fish hatcheries to job programs in order to get rid of some misbegotten dams.

The peculiar relationship between the Bureau and the two leading branches of government—in which it can defy the wishes of the branch that supposedly runs it and is largely subservient to the wishes of the other—is something relatively new. Mostly it is a development of the postwar era. In the past, the President often had to champion the Reclamation program *against* the objections of an eastern-dominated Congress, which found the whole idea a waste of money. Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, and even Herbert Hoover all fought with Congress over Reclamation dams they wanted built. As the dams occupied the population of the West, however, and as long-lived members of Congress from the South and West rose into important committee chairmanships, the character of Congressional leadership changed, and its attitudes followed. With Wayne Aspinall and Carl Hayden running the Interior and Appropriations committees, Ike could no more enforce a "no new starts" policy than Jimmy Carter could bounce a \$40 million Corps of Engineers dam whose sole beneficiary was to be a private catfish farm in the district of an influential Congressman from Oklahoma. As far as public works were concerned, by the 1950s

it was Congress, not the White House, that ran the government. We had become a plutocracy of the powerful and entrenched.

No one in government recognized this earlier, or exploited it more brilliantly, than Floyd Dominy. Dominy cultivated Congress as if he were tending prize-winning orchids. Long before he became commissioner, on almost any day you might find him eating lunch with some powerful or promising Congressman or Senator who needn't necessarily represent a western state. Not only would Dominy have lunch with him, but often Dominy would pick up the tab. If a Congressman broke his toe, he might receive a nice letter of condolence. Dominy sent out reams of condolence letters, often to acquaintances who could only be described as casual, though he didn't write too many himself; much of his underlings' work had nothing to do with dams. Favored Congressmen like Mike Kirwan (an easterner) might receive an expensive, custom-crafted set of bookends in the shape of Flaming Gorge and Hoover dams, which they could use to contain the public works bills that were flooding the country in a tide of red ink.

Dominy was a meticulous list-keeper. In his files he kept lists of the Bureau's friends on Capitol Hill, arranged in categories: close friends, reliable supporters, occasionally wayward supporters. Those on the "A" list were handsomely rewarded. "Dominy yanked money in and out of those Congressmen's districts like a yo-yo," says a former associate assistant Interior Secretary who admired Dominy so much he was assigned to tell him he was fired, and whose name was James Gaius Watt. "If some Senator was causing him trouble, money for his project could disappear mighty fast. It went right into projects for the politicians who were Dominy's friends." All Dominy had to do was order his engineering department to say that it simply couldn't spend the money any faster. A memorandum dated April 10, 1967, from Dominy's chief of public affairs, Ottis Peterson, put together, at Dominy's request, a list of Senators whose terms were about to expire and whom, in Peterson's words, "we should make a particular effort to protect and give as many news breaks as possible." The list of thirteen names—among which were McGovern of South Dakota, Morse of Oregon, Church of Idaho, and Magnuson of Washington—was for "very special attention and protection," although "we can fatten our batting average by taking care of everyone to the best of our ability." Small wonder that George McGovern became so blindly wedded to the Bureau's Oahe Diversion Project that his constituents voted him out of office thirteen years later when they turned against it.

Dominy's power and influence with Congress were so extraordinary that all he usually had to do to change his superiors' minds—

whether they were contemplating his dismissal or merely a stretch of Wild and Scenic River where he wanted to put a dam—was make a few phone calls to Congress. At worst, he simply had to threaten to resign.

Talk of resignation was Dominy's ace in the hole. "Dominy threatened to resign so many times I lost count," says his onetime regional director in Sacramento, Pat Dugan. Early in the 1960s, Stewart Udall's Under Secretary, Jim Carr, a voluble pro-Californian who loathed Dominy at least half as much as Dominy loathed him, ordered Dugan to fire his chief of planning, Pat Head, for allegedly causing delays in the preconstruction work for Auburn Dam—delays that Dominy may very well have instigated himself. Dugan was in Washington at the time, and he and Dominy went out to lunch. After they had consumed two big steaks and several belts of whiskey, Dugan told Dominy about Carr's order, and suggested self-effacingly that maybe *he* had better resign, since he was Pat Head's superior. Dominy was enraged. "Hell, let's *both* resign!" he boomed in a voice that stopped conversation cold. And, in fact, he made his customary threat, which wouldn't have worked so well if Udall hadn't suspected that he was mercurial enough to carry it out. But it did work, and neither Dominy, nor Dugan, nor even Pat Head left his job, and Jim Carr died without watching a bucket of concrete poured for his favorite dam. Small wonder Dominy used the threat of resignation so much—after all, it had made him commissioner.

Floyd Dominy was furious when Dexheimer failed to appoint him assistant commissioner, and he believed in carrying a grudge. After Dexheimer's designee, Ed Neilson, failed so miserably before the Appropriations Committee in 1955, only to be rescued by Dominy, the chief of the Irrigation Division went to see the commissioner after he returned from watching his atomic bomb blast. "Today I told the Commissioner that in eighteen years on government payroll . . . I had never seen an agency perform so ineptly," Dominy confided in his diary on June 7, 1955. "I went on to tell him that I thought it was a crime to personally absent himself from the City through practically all of the hearings. . . . I concluded that I was prepared to move up to strengthen the front office . . . I had made my speech and if he wished to think it over I would be available. With this I terminated the discussion." Contempt dripped from every word. Obviously, Dominy no longer thought he should be assistant commissioner; he thought he should be commissioner. Over the next several months, he lobbied assiduously on his own behalf with Congress. He was only forty-five,

and he had been in the Bureau less than half as long as others who were eminently qualified to replace Dexheimer. Not that this was about to deter Dominy—after all, they were merely engineers.

The campaign worked. Dominy fastidiously made a notation in his diary every time he won a Congressman over. Once, after going to see Congressman Keith Thomson of Wyoming only to find him preparing to pay a visit to Interior Secretary Douglas McKay, Dominy wrote approvingly, "His purpose in seeing McKay was to urge the appointment of Floyd E. Dominy as Commissioner." By 1957, Fred Seaton, who had replaced McKay as Secretary, was so besieged with requests to make Dominy commissioner that he had to do something. Seaton's solution was to appoint Dominy "associate commissioner"—a position that, as Seaton conceived it, would be about as meaningful as Vice-President. It had never before existed in the Bureau, and it has never existed since. Seaton, however, thought Dominy would be satisfied with a fancy title, and there he badly misjudged the man. Dominy wanted power. When, after several months, he still didn't have enough of it to suit him, he began making his wish plain to his friends in Congress—and threatening to quit. Fortunately, his wish was their wish, too. One day, Seaton called Dominy into his office for a chat. "The Secretary . . . advised me that he had been getting almost unanimous demands from Senators and Congressmen that I be put in charge of the Bureau's budget presentation and other works with the Congress," Dominy typed in his diary. "He went on to make it plain that he desired to carry out these changes in the Associate Commissioner role with as little discomfort to Commissioner Dexheimer as possible. He asked me to guard against any reaction that would tend to belittle the Commissioner. . . . I assured him that I would be as careful as possible in that connection."

That was hardly the way it was to be. "The whole thing was pathetic to watch," says an old Interior hand who was there. "Dexheimer was like an old bull who's been gored by a young contender and has lost his harem and is off panting under a tree, licking his wounds." The associate commissioner was now in substantial charge of the Reclamation Bureau—Dominy knew it, Dexheimer knew it, nearly everyone in the Bureau could see it. But Dexheimer had nowhere else to go. His whole life had been dams, and now he had reached the pinnacle of the dam-building profession. Any move would have been a step down, a terrible loss of face. One could hardly blame the commissioner for absenting himself as much as possible to deal with "important business" abroad. It was during one such trip—a month in Egypt—that Dominy decided to make his move. The day Dexheimer returned,

Dominy walked into his office and demanded all the authority he had been asking for. If he didn't get it, he would resign. Dexheimer said he would "think about it," and in the weeks that followed he continued to hedge and waffle, relinquishing as little power as he could but relinquishing it anyway, afraid that his popular associate commissioner would really deliver on his threat. Dominy was effectively in command when Congress put poor Dex out of his misery. A number of higher Reclamation officials—Dexheimer included—had been moonlighting at consulting jobs, and when the news reached Congress some members were furious about it. (These were the days when Cabinet members still resigned over ethical transgressions which, today, would be considered almost innocent.) When the commissioner refused to produce a list of offenders, Congress demanded that Eisenhower force him out. On May 1, 1959, Dexheimer, "for personal reasons," announced his resignation as Commissioner of Reclamation. "My decision was not arrived at easily," he said. Floyd Dominy landed in his seat a few days later with a terrific thump.

Most Commissioners of Reclamation were dull, pious Mormons—**M**or, if not Mormon, and pious, then at least dull. Floyd Dominy was a two-fisted drinker, a gambler; he had a scabrous vocabulary and a prodigious sex drive. In interviews, Bureau men tend to be careful, guarded, and obviously suspicious of reporters. Dominy was candid and amazingly open. Most commissioners like to operate within carefully defined parameters, always going by the book. Dominy was freewheeling and reckless, racing yellow lights and burning rubber in three gears. He could be methodical, he worked incredibly hard, he always did his homework—those were the qualities that sustained him through four successive administrations. But he had a self-destructive impulse, a violent temper, and a compulsion to tempt fate. He could, for example, make a lifelong enemy of a very powerful politician over lunch.

The governor of Utah during the early 1960s, George Dewey Clyde, personified, as far as Dominy was concerned, the hypocrisy of conservative Mormons—a faith he privately detested—where the Reclamation program was concerned. Clyde wanted the government to build as many dams as there were sites in his state, but he wanted private utilities to be able to sell the power. Dominy knew the Bureau needed the power to make the projects appear feasible, and besides, he was a Harry Truman Democrat—a warm, if not quite passionate,

public-power man. At the National Reclamation Association's annual convention in Portland in 1962, Clyde gave a ringing speech calling for unity among the western states in support of the Reclamation program. He deplored the fact that 40 percent of the members of Congress from the seventeen western states had failed to vote for two big projects the Bureau wanted built. However, Clyde said, the West had a duty to veto "counterfeit" reclamation projects—dams whose purpose was not irrigation but public power. He then went on to single out "a current example in a state neighboring Utah, where a project continues to be pushed by public-power interests which has no reclamation values, whatever." The project which he alluded to, but did not name, was the Bureau's Burns Creek Project in Idaho, which would occupy a hydroelectric site that the company of which Clyde was a puppet, Utah Power and Light, wanted to own itself.

Clyde might as well have impugned the morals of Dominy's daughter. Edward Weinberg, the Interior Department's solicitor, was sitting with Dominy as Clyde spoke. "Dominy just turned maroon," Weinberg recalls. "He said, 'Eddie, you keep me out of jail, but I gotta attack this guy.' Over lunch, he hunkered in a back room redrafting his prepared speech. He showed it to me after lunch, and I said, 'Jesus Christ, you can't say that! They'll crucify you!' 'Let them try' was all he said."

By the time Dominy was scheduled to give his speech, the three thousand conventioners already had an inkling that something portentous was likely to occur. "The title of my speech is 'Crosses Reclamation Has to Bear,'" Dominy began in a sarcastic voice. After making some desultory remarks about the Bureau's routine difficulties, he turned with relish to the subject at hand. "Only yesterday, my good friend, Governor Clyde of Utah, preached the gospel of unity to this association. He warned the West that if it did not unite, the cause of reclamation was in danger. I want to underscore the governor's warning. It is timely and it is true, but apparently the governor's warning fell on some deaf ears. Among those deaf ears, I regret to say, were those of Governor George D. Clyde of Utah." Dominy then tore into Clyde for attacking the Burns Creek Project—"a counterfeit reclamation project," he said acidly, "that was first proposed by those well-known foes of private power, Dwight Eisenhower and his Secretary of the Interior, Fred Seaton." As Clyde sat in the audience red-faced, Dominy's attack became more and more bitter. The delegates were absolutely stunned. "This is the Burns Creek Project which Governor Clyde considers false and a masquerade," Dominy was now shouting. "Is it any wonder that Reclamation's position in the Congress

is threatened when the Governor of one of our own Western States attacks a project not even located in his state?"

Nineteen years later, Weinberg was still shaking his head. "No one could believe it," he said. "George Dewey Clyde sat there like he'd been hit by a Buck Rogers ray. Dominy just stood up there smiling serenely. I've never known such nerve. It took the audience thirty seconds to decide whether it dared applaud him at the end of his speech.

"You'd probably have to go back to Andrew Jackson's administration," said Weinberg, his tone full of wonder, "to find another instance where a bureaucrat attacked a sitting governor like that."

Going after a sitting governor was one thing. Going after an entire profession was another, especially if it was a fraternity to which 95 percent of your immediate colleagues belonged. But Dominy was quite capable of that, too.

When the American Society of Civil Engineers held its annual meeting in 1961, they asked Stewart Udall to be the keynote speaker. Udall had a prior engagement and had to decline, and the natural person to speak in his stead was Floyd Dominy. This was the same society, however, whose president had twice written a letter to the President asking that Dominy not be appointed Commissioner of Reclamation—first when Eisenhower appointed him, then when Kennedy reconfirmed his appointment. The reason was both simple and gratuitous: Dominy was no engineer. "When Udall said I should speak in his place," Dominy remembers, "I told him, 'The hell I will!' I wasn't going to speak to a bunch of people who didn't think I deserved my job. I told Stewart, 'You make them send me a personal invitation to give the address. Then I will *consider* whether my schedule permits me to appear.' I didn't think they'd invite me, but damned if they didn't."

When he was introduced and took the lectern, the assembled engineers should have known what was coming. "I'm never fully at ease before so large a group," Dominy began, "but in this one instance I am at ease. I'm at ease because I know that *you* know that I know that I would never have been appointed commissioner if two Presidents had listened to your organization's advice. Be that as it may," Dominy went on, "I'm here to offer you gentlemen a little edification. I think that both you and your honorable president should go back and read the Reclamation Act, the document that has provided so many of you with jobs. I've read the act many times, and nowhere do I see evidence that it was set up as a job security program for engineers. The act is a land settlement program, and if land settlement were left

solely to engineers I think we would still be hunters and gatherers, because it's a lot sexier to design a better mace than it is to plant a garden.

"I'll make you a solemn vow here tonight," Dominy concluded after another few minutes of this. "I promise never to refuse to promote anyone in the Bureau of Reclamation just because he happens to be an engineer."

A few weeks after his speech, Floyd Elgin Dominy was inducted as an honorary member into the American Society of Civil Engineers.

If attacking the governor of Utah took nerve, if taking on the entire engineering profession took gall, then waging ceaseless war against one's superiors would have to be regarded as slightly nuts. But Dominy continually attacked and defied all three of his immediate superiors in the Interior bureaucracy—the Secretary, Under Secretary, and Assistant Secretary—and won nearly every time.

Stewart Udall, who served as Interior Secretary during the Kennedy-Johnson reign, was an enigmatic man. A jack Mormon—a lapsed member of the faith—who hailed from a desert state but assumed office on the threshold of the conservation era, he spent his entire term trying to reconcile his conflicting views on preservation and development, especially when it came to water projects. A smooth politician, handsome, vigorous, and diffident, he was a favorite of Jack Kennedy and a darling of the press; he was continually getting his picture in the papers. There was Stew Udall rafting rivers, Stew Udall climbing Alaskan peaks, Stew Udall and his sometime friend Dave Brower trekking through one of the National Parks. This was the same Stew Udall who wanted to build a nuclear-powered desalination plant off Long Beach to slake Los Angeles' giant thirst; the same Udall who secretly plotted aqueducts carrying water from the Columbia River to the Southwest; the Udall who gave his official, if not private blessing to plans to dam the Grand Canyon. However, what was to Udall a delicate reconciliation of divergent instincts was to Dominy—who held the conservation movement in contempt—a Hamlet-like ambivalence or, even worse, outright capitulation to "posy-sniffers."

To make a strained relationship worse, Udall appointed as his Under Secretary James Carr, a brash, opinionated young Irish Catholic from California who could not help inflaming the ire of a brash, opinionated, and older Floyd Dominy, who happened to be a Celtic-Irish Protestant. To make matters still worse, Udall appointed as his Assistant Secretary for Water and Power a big, dour South Dakota Norwegian named Kenneth Holum, a man whose very essence and style found their exact opposites in Floyd Dominy.

Dominy's battles with Udall were, for the most part, due to disagreements on issues; personally, when neither had the other's goat, they liked each other tolerably well. On the other hand his battles with Holum and Carr had more to do with the fact that Dominy despised them both as much as they loathed him. Carr had been the legislative assistant of someone else Dominy hated: Congressman Clair Engle of California, who tried repeatedly to get him removed from his job for not favoring California enough. (When Engle died of brain cancer, Dominy told his inner circle, half seriously, that he was responsible. "That cancer in his head was something I put there. He got it arguing with me all the time." Twenty years later, the commissioner still loved to tell about the time he booted the Congressman out of his office.) Personal dislike soon escalated into all-out war: Holum was trying to prevent Dominy from giving a speech; Carr was ordering him not to make a trip; Carr and Holum were trying to give the commissioner a new secretary who Dominy suspected was their personal spy. By late 1962 or 1963, the feud had grown so intense that it kept the denizens of the Interior building coming to work just to see what would happen next. Before long, Dominy, to the amazement and exasperation of Udall, had established a firm policy on dealing with Holum: the commissioner would no longer walk downstairs to speak with the assistant secretary. If the big dumb sonofabitch wished to speak with the commissioner, he could walk upstairs to see *him*. "As his superior I simply had to rein him in from time to time," muttered Holum during a telephone interview, and declined to discuss the subject further. The truth was, however, that Dominy made a fool of Holum much more frequently than Holum made a fool of him. The one time he did—when he and Carr managed to freeze the commissioner off the Presidential airplane during one of Kennedy's western tours—Udall returned to his office only to find powerful Congressman Wayne Aspinall on the other end of the telephone, waiting to chew off his ear. After that, Dominy not only got to ride on Air Force One, but he had his *own* fancy aircraft—and his own building.

For years, the world's great amalgamation of engineering talent had been housed in a complex of warehouses, military depots, and glorified barracks outside Denver known today as Federal Center. Then, it was simply known as the Ammo Depot. Thrown up hastily during the war, the Bureau's headquarters, a two-block-long hangar called Building Fifty-six, had neither air conditioning nor many windows. The only source of heat was some undersized radiators spaced many yards apart. Chunks of ceiling calved like icebergs; water dribbled from a

hundred leaks. The plumbing sounded as if a team of Russian weightlifters were banging wrenches against the pipes.

Mike Staus and Dexheimer had tolerated this travesty of a headquarters, but Dominy would not. He wouldn't keep his cows in there. He was going to get Congress to appropriate money for a new building—a new building that would, in time, become known as the Floyd E. Dominy Building. Under his tutelage, the Bureau's public relations department produced a picture book called *Inside Building Fifty-six*. In it were photographs of rusting pipes, of rotting ceilings suspended over bowed heads, of huddled secretaries typing in overcoats. Accompanying the pictures was a text that might have described the Sheraton Maui. It was, especially from engineers, a high-class piece of wit. The results, however, were negligible. Udall was frightened of a new building's cost; a few Congressmen even wondered out loud why such a brochure should be produced at public expense. That was enough to make Dominy mad, but not half as mad as he was when he learned that the General Services Administration, run by a close friend of James Carr—the same Jim Carr who had told Dominy that the Bureau's headquarters were adequate—erected a new building next door to house the complex's garbage cans.

The federal code stated things plainly enough: the construction of new federal edifices, unless Congress voted otherwise, was left to the discretion of the GSA. Dominy asked his lawyer, Eddie Weinberg, to give him the exceptions to the rule. There were none, Weinberg said—except that, obviously, the GSA had no say-so over the Bureau's dams. "Well, then, it's simple," he told Weinberg, "we'll get the goddamned thing authorized as a dam."

It was a quintessential Dominy solution, brilliant in its simplicity, splendid in its insolence. The building would be authorized as a dam. The Senate Appropriations Committee—Carl Hayden, chairman—would approve money for Dominy Dam, and the dam would metamorphose into a building. Then it was only a matter of getting the House to agree.

Fascinated by the outcome of this thing, Weinberg was finally persuaded to go along. Later that year, there was Dominy, with Hayden's blessing already in hand, testifying before his counterpart on the House Appropriations Committee, chairman Clarence Cannon of Missouri. Dominy was eloquent in his blunt Harry Truman style. "I've got a building where icicles practically form in winter," he complained, "and a plane where ice *does* form, right in the carburetor. My people need a decent place to work, and I need a plane that isn't going to fall out of the sky so I can live to see them enjoy it."

Cannon asked, "Do you have any idea when your plane might fall out of the sky?"

"Probably on the very next flight," said Dominy.

"Well, you let me know, then, when you plan to arrange it," said Cannon. "I've got a list of passengers for you."

Then, without further questioning, Cannon approved both of Dominy's requests.

When Carr's friend, the GSA administrator, found out that Dominy had sneaked a new building into a bill that nominally authorized only dams, he was apoplectic. When Carr found out soon thereafter that Dominy had immediately signed a \$250,000 design agreement without his approval, *he* was beside himself. Carr forgot, however, that Dominy had been clever enough to make a friend in every strategic place; and there was no more strategic place in the Interior Building than the mailroom.

Stewart Udall was out of town, making a speech, but he was indignant when he learned from Carr how Dominy had operated behind his back. With the Secretary's approval, Carr wrote and signed a letter agreeing to hand the \$250,000 back to the Treasury. "When I found out about that," says Dominy, "I called my man in the mailroom. I said, 'I'll take the rap and you'll keep your job—don't you let that letter out of the building.' He promised me he wouldn't. Then I called up Udall that night in his hotel room. I dialed him every fifteen minutes so he wouldn't get away from me. When I got through to him, I said, 'Stew, dammit, you can't do that. It's not \$250,000 cash. It's \$250,000 credit with the Appropriations Committee. I promised them I'd save that amount of money in the rest of the program. It's their money, not yours. You do this and you're going to run smack into Senator Carl Hayden and Congressman Clarence Cannon.'

"That did it," Dominy chortled. "There was nothing he could do. I got my building. I got my airplane, too. When the GSA chief found out the building was going to be a high-rise, he really squeaked. He sent me three letters of complaint. I didn't bother to answer one."

For years, the Dominy Building—a name it has not yet officially received—was the only high-rise anywhere around Denver. You could see it from far across the Platte River, rising significantly behind the thrusting skyline of downtown. Without knowing what it was, you knew it was a monument to something or someone powerful. "I want it functional, dammit!" Dominy barked at his architects. "I want a building like a dam." What he got is a lot worse. Square as a cinder block, thuddingly banal, it is done in the Megaconglomerate style of the 1960s and 1970s—a J. Edgar Hoover Building without the gro-

tesque semicantilevered overhangs. Despite the cold, the heat, and the feeling of marcescence, Building Fifty-six had a refreshing air of purposefulness, a MASH-like crisis atmosphere. The Dominy Building, by contrast, is fixed, solid, and sealed, as impervious to a rose's scent as to a typhoon—rather like a dam. When it was finished, thousands of Bureau engineers could leave their climate-controlled suburban homes, climb into their climate-controlled cars, and drive to their climate-controlled, windowless new offices, never once encountering the real world.

It is probably pure coincidence that, at about the same time, the mid-1960s, the Bureau—especially its chief—began losing touch with other types of reality.

In the early days, Floyd Dominy had been something of a crusader, if only because he hated being pushed around by politicians and big farmers. Bureau water was by far the cheapest in the West, sold at a fraction of its free-market worth, and if you could manage to irrigate enough land with it you could not only prosper, you could grow rich. Legally, under the Reclamation Act, you could irrigate 160 acres and no more. "We didn't even want them to irrigate that much land," says Dominy. "The law was created to pack as many farmers as possible in a region with limited water. If they could make a living on forty acres, we gave them water for forty. We were talking about subsistence." However, many farmers in Bureau projects were irrigating 320 acres, the result of a liberal interpretation of the act that permitted joint ownership and irrigation of 320 acres by a man and wife. (Married men, it was discovered, made more reliable farmers than bachelors.) In all but the highest and coldest regions of the West, you could make a good living on 320 acres irrigated by subsidized water. If you were in California and raised two cash crops a year with water that cost a quarter of a cent per ton, you could make more money than a lawyer. In 1958, the Fresno Chamber of Commerce published a brochure whose purpose was to lure more farmers to the Central Valley, and which estimated the number of irrigated acres one had to plant in various crops to support a family. The figure for oranges was twenty to thirty acres; for peaches, thirty to forty acres; for grapes and raisins, forty to fifty acres; for figs, sixty to eighty acres. Even a hundred and twenty acres of cotton and alfalfa, comparatively low-value crops, could support a family if you had Reclamation water.

Rumors abounded, however, of corporate farmers illegally irrigating thousands of acres with the super-subsidized water—by inventing complicated lease-out lease-back arrangements, by controlling

excess land through dummy corporations, by leasing from relatives, and so on. It is unclear how much the Bureau knew about this and how exact its knowledge was; what is clear is that it did little or nothing to end it. Even a self-proclaimed populist like Mike Straus was afraid to tangle with the giant California farming corporations and the politicians they helped elect. "Straus huffed and puffed about the acreage limit," Dominy said later, "but he didn't do a damn thing to enforce it." (This is largely but not completely true. One of Straus's worries, which turned out to be well founded, was that the Corps of Engineers, unencumbered by social legislation or much of a social conscience, would gladly step in and replace the Bureau as the major water developer of the West if the Bureau began cracking down too hard on violators.)

At first, Dominy was self-righteous about enforcing the Reclamation Act. In 1954, when the Corps of Engineers, with the acquiescence of Interior Under Secretary Clarence Davis, tried to do exactly what Mike Straus feared—let water from its two biggest California reservoirs run free of charge onto the lands of two gigantic farming corporations, the J. G. Boswell Company and the Salyer Land Company—he was apoplectic. "Special Assistant Frye showed the [Under Secretary's] letter [of acquiescence] to me confidentially," Dominy wrote in his professional diary on February 4, 1955. "I blew my top and stated emphatically the detrimental effect that would have on Reclamation's ability to conclude repayment contract negotiations . . . with other groups of water users. [A] very plausible legal basis can be made that Congress has directed that irrigation water available as a result of Army construction should be sold pursuant to Reclamation law."

Later, Dominy, now chief of the Irrigation Division, paid a visit to the Boise regional office and learned, he wrote in his diary, "that there is apparently a rather widespread evasion of the incremental land provisions of the Columbia Basin Project Act." (According to the incremental-land-value provisions of the act, beneficiaries newly supplied with Bureau water are supposed to sell their excess lands at a price reflecting their worth *before* the Bureau water arrived. Otherwise, speculation would be as rampant as in the old days of the Homestead Acts; people with an insider's knowledge of future projects could buy land in the project area for \$10 or \$20 an acre and sell it later for fifty times as much.) "I made it plain," Dominy wrote, "that it was the Bureau of Reclamation's responsibility to either (a) energetically enforce the law or (b) ask Congress to repeal it." When Assistant Interior Secretary Aandahl privately expressed extreme reluctance to prosecute the violators, Dominy wrote, "I am happy to report that this is

the first time in my 24 years of Government work that I have heard a top administrator say that he was unwilling to take action to enforce a law which he was sworn to uphold and which comes under his jurisdiction." Ultimately, there was an FBI investigation, a prosecution, and a conviction in the Columbia Basin case. The sentence was a fine of \$850. "The sentence made you feel like a fool," says Gil Stamm, who worked on the case with Dominy and was ultimately to succeed him as commissioner.

It did gross injury to Floyd Dominy's image to be made to look like a fool. That may be the main reason why, as commissioner, his indignation over violations of the Reclamation Act appeared to evaporate like a summer cloud. Under Dominy's tenure, the one serious example of enforcement in the Bureau's career did take place: the breakup of the huge DiGiorgio Company holdings in California after it was proved that the lands were illegally receiving subsidized water. But the main instigator in that action was not Dominy but Frank Barry, the first Interior solicitor under John Kennedy. And though it is true, as Dominy insists, that the record of enforcement during his reign was at least as good as any other commissioner's, that isn't saying much, because the record of enforcement over eighty years has been almost nil. Not only that, but the violations had become more frequent and worse by the time Dominy was appointed. It wasn't until the administration of Jimmy Carter that a serious attempt was even made to find out how bad the violations were. The conclusion was that they had multiplied considerably after the Second World War and reached their apogee about the time Dominy became commissioner. As it happened, the Carter investigation found that the vast majority of illegalities were occurring in California and Arizona. But the senior Senator from Arizona was Dominy's best friend in Congress, Carl Hayden. In California, the Congressmen who represented the region where most of the acreage violations were taking place were three Dominy stalwarts: Bizz Johnson, John McFall, and Bernie Sisk. None of those gentlemen ever showed much interest in enforcing the acreage limitations of the Reclamation Act. They did, however, display a passionate interest in new dams, and their attitudes became Floyd Dominy's attitudes the longer he remained in office. He had begun as a crusader, a person who at least appeared to possess a sense of fairness and justice, a non-engineer whose outlook was basically agrarian. He ended his term as a zealot, blind to injustice, locked into a mad-dog campaign against the environmental movement and the whole country over a pair of Grand Canyon dams.

The fact is that Dominy *knew* that scandalous violations of the

acreage limit were occurring right around Los Angeles—for example, that the Irvine Ranch, one of the largest private landholdings in the entire world, was illegally receiving immense amounts of taxpayer-subsidized Reclamation water—and did absolutely nothing to stop it. When he was shown the list of violators, compiled during a months-long secret investigation, he put it in his desk drawer and never looked at it again. Though he went to great lengths to try to disprove it, Dominy knew that the Bureau was opening new lands for crops which farmers were paid not to grow back east—cotton being the prime offender. The Bureau could easily have refused to supply new water to a region until it could demonstrate that its crop patterns would not make the nation's agricultural surpluses worse, but its response, under Dominy, was to launch a belligerent campaign to deny that the problem existed.

When Dominy appeared *not* to realize was that these three syndromes, often occurring at once—farmers illegally irrigating excess acreage with dirt-cheap water in order to grow price-supported crops—were badly tarnishing the Bureau's reputation. By the 1960s, the Reclamation program was under attack not only from conservationists but from church groups (who objected to its tacit and illegal encouragement of big corporate farms), from conservatives, from economists, from eastern and midwestern farmers, and from a substantial number of newspapers and magazines that had usually supported it in the past—even from the Hearst papers in California. Dominy was not so blind that he didn't see this; his fatal mistake was in believing that the protest and indignation amounted to sound and fury signifying nothing: Dominy had a peculiar adeptness at denying reality. And the conservation movement was the reality he liked least of all.

Throughout its history, the conservation movement had been little more than a minor nuisance to the water-development interests in the American West. They had, after all, twice managed to invade National Parks with dams; they had decimated the greatest salmon fishery in the world, in the Columbia River; they had taken the Serengeti of North America—the virgin Central Valley of California, with its thousands of grizzly bears and immense clouds of migratory waterfowl and its million and a half antelope and tule elk—and transformed it into a banal palatinate of industrial agriculture. The Bureau got away with its role in this partly because its spiritual fathers, John Wesley Powell and Theodore Roosevelt, happened to be two of the

foremost conservationists of their day—a heritage which, in the right hands, might have all but immunized it against more modern conservationists' attacks.

The Bureau's response to the rising tide of conservation, however, was to let them eat cake. It might have learned some valuable lessons from the Corps of Engineers, which at least knew how to build a Trojan horse. While the Corps was preoccupied with such mightily intrusive wonders as the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway and its county-size reservoirs in the South, it was proclaiming the 1970s the "Decade of the Environment," publishing a four-color magazine devoted to wild rivers and fish and swamps, and holding regular palavers with its environmental adversaries to throw them off guard. General John Woodland Morris, who became chief of the Corps in 1970, is regarded by many conservationists as the most brilliant and effective adversary they ever met. Some of the same adjectives are used to describe Dominy—tough, brilliant, formidable—but it is odd how seldom anyone refers to him as "effective."

Dominy's problem stemmed from a fatal sin—pride—and a fatal misjudgment: that his despised adversary, David Brower, was the corporeity of the conservation movement—its unanimous voice, its unified soul. To Dominy, anyone who objected to any single thing the Bureau wanted to do was "a Dave Brower type." He failed utterly to understand that Brower had always been a fringe figure in the conservation movement—respected, admired, but not necessarily followed or trusted or believed. Jack Morris of the Corps understood that, as a rule, conservationists enjoyed widespread public respect—that an endorsement from one conservation organization was worth the endorsements of a hundred Chambers of Commerce. He knew that when it came to a conflict between nature and civilization, millions of Americans automatically turned to the conservation groups for guidance. If such an organization endorsed a compromise proposal, general opposition could die like a puff of wind.

But the last thing Floyd Dominy was going to do was seek a compromise with conservation groups. If he went out of his way at all, it was to antagonize them. On February 13, 1966, he gave a speech in North Dakota lambasting the principle that certain rivers, or portions of rivers, ought to be set aside as "wild and scenic." Calling the undammed Colorado River "useless to anyone," Dominy harrumphed, "I've seen all the wild rivers I ever want to see." The speech elicited a testy letter from the state's fish and game commissioner (who was hardly a Dave Brower type) to Stewart Udall, suggesting that Dominy badly needed some edification about changing American values—not

to mention the importance of rivers and wetlands to waterfowl. "Floyd, it seems to me that Commissioner Stuart has a point," Udall wrote in a short memo with a copy of the letter attached. "My Secretary's becoming a Dave Brower type," Dominy sneered to his comrades in arms. A few months later, ignoring his advice, Congress passed the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Under Dominy, the Bureau lost touch with reality so completely that it developed an uncanny knack for snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. At the northern end of Lake Havasu, a few miles south of Needles, California, it had inadvertently created a large freshwater wetland known as Topock Marsh. Migrating ducks and geese that were evicted from the Central Valley soon discovered the marsh and descended on it by the tens of thousands during their winter sojourns. By the late 1940s, Topock Marsh had become one of the most important man-made attractions on the Pacific Flyway, and the Bureau, had it had any sense, would have graciously accepted its share of credit and basked in it. The grasses and duckweed, however, were phreatophytes, and consumed valuable water that could have been sold to Imperial Valley farmers for \$3.50 an acre-foot. As a result, the Bureau began trying to dredge the marsh in 1948; when at first the dredging didn't work, it spent millions of dollars and stepped up its efforts and pursued them so relentlessly that by the 1960s about 90 percent of the food grasses were gone. The marsh's visiting waterfowl soon diminished from forty or fifty thousand a year to a few hundred or thousand at most.

Dominy's Bureau regarded the operation as a "success," failing utterly to recognize the public relations catastrophe into which it had happily stepped. Even Imperial Valley farmers, who had so much water to waste that some of them applied ten or twelve feet per year to their crops, were opposed to the dredging because they liked to shoot ducks. Ben Avery, a widely read outdoor columnist for the *Arizona Republic*—a newspaper never known to oppose water development unless it was California's—adopted Topock Marsh as his personal crusade and made a point of savaging the Bureau several times a year. In June of 1966, one of his columns finally caught Dominy's attention. "I believe we will have to take Avery on," he wrote to his regional director, Arleigh West, "or face up to the realities [sic] that there is a great deal of truth in what he is saying." In other words, Dominy *knew* Avery was right. He *knew* that Topock Marsh was pitiful compensation for all the habitat the Bureau and Corps had ruined. He *knew* that the marsh would reappear unless the Bureau continued to spend millions of dollars trying to annihilate it. But which course

of action did he choose? The Bureau, he decided, was going to deny everything Ben Avery said and continue demolishing the marsh.

Stewart Udall was upset over the Topock Marsh situation, and since the marsh was being eradicated for the sake of California—not Arizona—he ordered Dominy to do something about it. In typical fashion, Dominy's response was to try to make an end run around Udall, through the Congress. Though he was nominally Dominy's boss, Udall didn't like tangling with his two-fisted commissioner; that was the reason he had John Carver on his staff. Small, tough, and profane, built like a bantamweight prize-fighter, Carver had been hired to be Udall's all-purpose troubleshooter. Manhandling Dominy, however, was turning into his full-time job.

"The summit meeting was to take place in Udall's office," remembers John Gottschalk, who was then the director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. "It was a good choice—the Secretary was absent, but the trappings of authority would impose themselves. I was a little late in arriving, and as I was walking down the hall I could already hear Carver and Dominy at each others' throats. God Almighty! Were they screaming at each other! When I walked in they were standing at opposite sides of Udall's desk just like a couple of football players facing off. They were pounding the table with their fists. Dominy's face was beet-red. I remember him yelling, 'What do you want me to do? Resign my fucking job?' And Carver was shouting back, 'We want you to get on the team, Floyd! We don't want you to resign. We want you to stop throwing tantrums and get on the goddamned team!'"

"I just stood there transfixed," says Gottschalk. "I didn't know whether to try to break it up or slink out the door. It went on like that for another fifteen minutes until Dominy gave up. I remember exactly what he said. He yelled, 'You realize you're asking me to go against every sound precept of water management for a bunch of goddamned birds and fish!' And then he barged out the door like a Sherman tank."

By the mid-sixties, Dominy finally had realized that the conservation movement was a serious enough threat to the Reclamation program that he would have to acknowledge not only its existence, but its political power. At first he had paid it as much attention as he would a flea, but now he began to go after the flea with a hydrogen bomb. In one issue of *Audubon* magazine—which had a circulation far smaller than it does today—the magazine's bird-watching columnist, Olin Pettingill, made a derogatory reference to the Bureau in an article which, for the most part, was about curlews and gallinules. Pettingill remarked that the Bureau's Nimbus Dam, on the American

River east of Sacramento, "has ruined what once were spawning grounds for salmon and steelhead rainbow trout"—an observation that happens to be entirely true. That was the sum total of Pettingill's criticism: one sentence in a two-thousand-word article about birds. However, as far as Dominy was concerned, the magazine was guilty of delivering "a gratuitous slap in the face." He wrote to his regional director, "We think it would be opportune and worthwhile to work with the Sacramento newspaper in the development of a feature story on the lengths to which Reclamation has gone . . . to enhance the fishery and wildlife resources of the Central Valley. An ideal situation would be for such a story to be used in the *Bee* on the opening day of the Audubon Society convention in Sacramento, to be followed up by an editorial."

Two interesting questions are raised by Dominy's response. One is whether he really had enough influence with the Sacramento *Bee* to enlist it in an orchestrated campaign to perfume the Bureau's reputation. One also wonders what he had in mind when he spoke of Reclamation projects "enhancing" fish and wildlife habitat in the Central Valley. By the mid-1960s, nearly 90 percent of the valley's wetlands habitat was gone, almost entirely because of irrigation farming, and wetlands were by far the most important natural feature in all its five-hundred-mile length; the valley was once the winter destination of a hundred million waterfowl cruising the Pacific Flyway, and now their numbers were reduced to five or six million, jammed onto refuges or forced to scrounge a meal in unwelcoming farmers' fields. The Sacramento-San Joaquin river system once had six thousand miles of salmon spawning streams, but by the mid-1960s there were perhaps six hundred miles left, and it was the Bureau's dams, cemented across rivers low down in the foothills, that blocked the salmon most effectively. So what had the Bureau done to "enhance" fish and wildlife resources? At best, it had created a series of slack-water reservoirs that were host to such rough fish as catfish, crappie, and bass, plus some trout and an occasional landlocked salmon. The reservoirs were useless to ducks and geese, which couldn't feed in their deep waters and would be driven mad by the powerboats anyway.

Those reservoirs, however, were the only thing Dominy could have had in mind, unless he had completely lost touch. To him, it seemed, nothing in nature was worthwhile unless it was visited by a lot of people. If it was a pristine river, accessible only by floatplane or jeep or on foot, navigable only by whitewater raft or kayak or canoe, populated by wily fish such as steelhead that were difficult to catch, then

it was no good. But if the river was transformed into a big flatwater reservoir off an interstate highway, with marinas and houseboats for rent—then it was worth something after all.

There was, for example, Lake Powell. Before Glen Canyon Dam had been built, that stretch of the Colorado River was one of the remotest, most inaccessible places in the United States. Only a few thousand people had seen it. Utterly unlike the turbulent reaches of the Grand Canyon, Glen Canyon was a stretch of quiet water drifting sinuously between smooth, rainbow-colored cliffs. Labyrinthine and cool, some of the canyons were as lush as a tropical forest, utterly incongruous in the desert. All of this was drowned by Lake Powell, but to demonstrate how nature had actually been improved, Dominy decided to publish a book called *Lake Powell: Jewel of the Colorado*. He even decided to take the photographs and write the text himself. "Dear God," he wrote on the inside cover, "did you cast down two hundred miles of canyon and mark: 'For poets only'? Multitudes hunger for a lake in the sun." He went on:

How can I describe the sculpture and colors along Lake Powell's shores? Over eons of time, wind and rain have carved the sandstone into shapes to please 10,000 eyes. The graceful, the dramatic, the grand, the fantastic. Evolution into convolution and involution. Sharp edges, blunt edges, soaring edges, spires, cliffs, and castles in the sky. . . . Like a string of pearls ten modern recreation areas will line Lake Powell's shores, with names that have the tang of the Old West. . . . Feel like exploring? Hundreds of side canyons—where few ever trod before the lake formed—are yours. . . . You have a front-row seat in an amphitheater of infinity. . . . Orange sandstone fades to dusky red—then to blackest black. . . . There is peace. And a oneness with the world and God. I know. I was there.

Dominy's war against the conservationists may have given him some satisfaction, but, from his point of view, it was hardly time well spent. No public figure would be as hated by the environmental movement until James Watt came along a decade later. His blind insistence on building dams in the Grand Canyon—not just dams, but cash register dams whose purpose was to generate income to build more dams—won him the wrath of *Reader's Digest* and *My Weekly Reader*; his habit of making end runs around federal laws and regulations by begging special relief from Congress did not endear him to those whose

laws he was circumventing; and hundreds of well-placed officials in Washington, many within his own building, were laying for him.

Despite all this, in the late 1960s Dominy was as entrenched as any bureaucrat in Washington. The main reason was his relationship with Senator Carl Hayden of Arizona, the chairman of the Appropriations Committee, the most powerful man in legislative government. It was the relationship of a fawning nephew and a favorite uncle—the kind of relationship young Lyndon Johnson enjoyed with Sam Rayburn—and it gave Dominy an authority, an insolence, an invulnerability scarcely anyone else enjoyed.

When Carl Hayden was in his late eighties, senile, half blind, half deaf, confined to a hospital bed half the time, Floyd Dominy all but served as chairman of the Appropriations Committee when dam authorizations came around. He managed this by telling Hayden exactly what he wanted him to say—by actually writing dialogue for the two of them to recite. He would go to Hayden's office, sit down with his legislative aide, Roy Elson, and write the questions he wanted Hayden to ask him; then he would go back to his own office and write the answers. It is unclear whether he did the same for other witnesses. The Hayden-Dominy scripts were of dubious enough ethical propriety for Dominy to keep them locked in the Bureau's sensitive files, their existence known to only a handful of aides. Old, frail, and sick as he was, Hayden was still a man no one wanted to cross, and Dominy, knowing this, basked as long as he could in his failing light. "When you walked into Dominy's office," says John Gottschalk, "the first thing you saw was a huge framed picture of Hayden and Dominy getting off a plane in Hawaii all decked out in leis. Hayden's inscription went something like this: 'As this photograph was being taken I was thinking to myself that Floyd Dominy is the greatest Reclamation Commissioner who ever lived.'"

"It was powerful medicine," says Gottschalk. "There's no member of Congress today who's nearly as powerful as Hayden was then. You'd walk in there to complain about something the Bureau did and see that picture and say to yourself, 'How the hell am I going to go up against this man and win?'"

Dominy was, of course, much too canny to put all of his eggs in Carl Hayden's basket. In the House, he maintained the most cordial of relations with Wayne Aspinall, the chairman of the House Interior Committee. Aspinall, a former schoolteacher from Palisade, Colorado, with a nasty disposition and a religious conviction that only the Bureau of Reclamation stood between the West and Armageddon, would say that Floyd Dominy was "not only the best Reclamation Commissioner

I have ever known, but the *only* good Reclamation Commissioner I have known." Besides cultivating the powerful, Dominy, for the most part, did a marvelous job of concealing his political prejudices from the world. He could get on famously with Frank Church, the liberal Senator from Idaho, and get on just as famously with William Egan, the right-wing governor of Alaska. If a Congressman didn't get on famously or even politely with him, Dominy had little compunction about taking revenge: a dam project in his district might suddenly become unfeasible, a weather modification program might move somewhere else. "He pulled money in and out of those Congressmen's projects like a yo-yo." Loved by some, feared by many, respected by all, Dominy seems to have had only one enemy of consequence in the whole Congress—Senator Henry Jackson of Washington. But Jackson knew better than to take his enmity too far.

And Dominy could be jovial, amusing, a lot of fun. Reclamation parties were legendary in Washington—hardly what one would expect in a hotbed of Mormon engineers. He could beat the conservationists at their own game. When the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society and others complained bitterly that a finger of Lake Powell would extend to Rainbow Bridge, a spectacular natural arch in Utah, leaving a stagnant, fluctuating, man-made pool of water under one of the nation's scenic wonders, Dominy went to see the place himself—on foot, with a mule. It was a grueling twenty-mile hike in desert heat to the arch, a trek so tough the mule almost didn't make it. Later, he flew a bunch of conservationists in by helicopter so they could see it themselves, taking care to ask each one whether he had been there before. Almost none had. Dominy used that fact to great advantage in testimony before Congress. Not only had they never seen what they so passionately wanted to protect, he said acidly, but they wanted him to erect a *dam* to keep the waters out. A dam! After regaling the committee with his story, Dominy got a special exemption from the federal law prohibiting significant man-made intrusions in national monuments. Today Rainbow Bridge is visited mainly by overweight vacationers clambering out of houseboats and trudging up to stare briefly at the arch.

He had a politician's way with names. On visits to the Bureau's dams, he greeted maintenance people whom he had met briefly years before, and he even knew the names of people he had never met. When the University of Wyoming awarded him an honorary degree, he was invited to dinner at the home of Gene Gressley, the director of its American Heritage Center. He had never met Gressley, nor his family, but when he walked in the door he knew all of Gressley's children by

name. When, during an interview, I reminded Dominy of the incident and told him how impressed Gressley said he had been, his response seemed somehow predictable: "Who's he?"

One of his former aides said Dominy liked people the way we like animals—we like them, but we eat them. His employees laughed at his antics, admired his guts, profoundly respected his abilities, and were scared half to death. He could be sadistic, and he would carry a grudge to his grave. As soon as he became commissioner, he tried to fire all of his regional directors—not on the basis of incompetence, necessarily, but because they had been appointed by Dexheimer. But he couldn't dislodge the one whose head he wanted most, Bruce Johnson in the Billings office, because Johnson had strong political support. The reason he wanted to fire Johnson so badly is that he had refused to arrange a "date" for Dominy with his secretary, whom Johnson was courting himself. Unable to depose him, Dominy tried to hound Johnson out—ridiculing him mercilessly, intimidating him, humiliating him. Johnson took it for several years and finally quit.

He hated weakness, but he needed a weak person to serve as his whipping boy, and he had one in Arleigh West, his regional director in Boulder City. "Arleigh was his Sancho Panza," says Pat Dugan, one of the few whom Dominy didn't cow. "He had a rough life. He brought out everything that was sadistic in Floyd." When West was in Washington, Dominy commandeered his hotel room as his trysting spot, and there were evenings when poor Arleigh found himself out window-shopping, waiting for Dominy to finish. He had someone in Denver—another weak man, a top-level aide—whom everyone referred to as the "Official Pimp." His responsibilities went beyond procurement. When a public relations flack leaked the story of how Dominy had gotten Congress to give him a new airplane, thinking he was doing Dominy a favor—after all, he was always telling those kinds of stories on himself—the Commissioner was beside himself. He was in the middle of a meeting with some Colorado bureaucrats at the time. "You fire that son of a bitch," he yelled to the Official Pimp in the presence of the astonished bureaucrats. "We can't fire him," said the Pimp, "he's civil service." "You fire him," roared Dominy, "or I'll can your goddamned ass, too!"

It wasn't his blindness, his stubbornness, his manipulation of Congress, his talent for insubordination, his contempt for wild nature, his tolerance of big growers muscling into the Reclamation program—in the end, it wasn't any of this that did Dominy in. It was his innate self-destructiveness, which manifested itself most blatantly in an undisguised preoccupation with lust. His sexual exploits were legendary.

They were also true. Whenever and wherever he traveled, he wanted a woman for the night. He had no shame about propositioning anyone. He would tell a Bureau employee with a bad marriage that his wife was a hell of a good lay, and the employee wouldn't know whether he was joking or not. He preferred someone available, but his associates say he wasn't above paying cash. "The regional directors were expected to find women for him," says one former regional director. "It always amazed me how he carried on in the light of day. He was opening himself up to blackmail, but somehow he always seemed immune." The Bureau airplane was known, by some, as the "Winged Boudoir in the Sky."

As he bullied weak men, Dominy preyed on women whom he considered easy marks. According to one regional director, Felix Sparks, the head of Colorado's Water Conservation Board, was married to a woman who occasionally overindulged, so Dominy went right after her. In time, an indignant Mary Sparks refused to attend any party where Dominy threatened to show up. Sparks, one of the most decorated veterans of World War II, might have been expected to punch Dominy in the jaw. Everyone, however, seemed to humor him. "He's just being *Floyd*," they would say. "You know how *Floyd* is." "He's just a little drunk. Ignore him."

Alice Dominy must have known. Her life was insulated, she rarely went with him on trips, but for years everyone suspected that she knew. And there came a day when she had to find out for sure. She drove into town to the hotel where according to the rumors, he liked to conduct his trysts. She took the elevator upstairs, mustered her courage, and knocked on the door. A woman opened up. Floyd Dominy, her husband, was in the back of the room. "He just told her to go home and mind her own business," says one of Dominy's confidants. "And she was of that era where that's what women did. I don't know how he rationalized it. He probably said, 'Well, lots of people commit adultery.' He had a talent for rationalizing anything."

"Alice was sweet. She was a dear lady. It broke your heart to see her treated that way."

Dominy did not even aspire to discretion. He bragged about his exploits. He taunted his assistants with remarks about their wives. He ordered them to find him women. It seemed as if he simply couldn't help himself. He could testify before Congress on a half bottle of bourbon and two hours of sleep, he could throw Representative Clair Engle out of his office, he could learn more about the Reclamation program than any person alive—he was tough, ferociously disciplined, indomitable. But he was also compulsive, addicted, a fool for lust—and

exposed himself quite recklessly to full view. "I'm not sure what Dominy is better remembered for," says one Washington lawyer who knew him well, "having been Commissioner of Reclamation or having been the greatest cocksman in town."

"I've tried to psychoanalyze him," says Pat Dugan, "and I don't think he ever believed that his playing around would get him in real trouble. He got away with so much that after a while he must have decided he was immune."

But he wasn't.

The man assigned to tell Floyd Dominy that he was fired was a young, intense, middle-level Interior bureaucrat barely thirty years old, a fire-breathing evangelical Christian from Wyoming named James G. Watt. The order came directly from the newly inaugurated President of the United States, Richard M. Nixon. At Nixon's behest, the FBI had run its customary investigation of top federal officials to look for improprieties and had come back with a file on Dominy that was inches thick. ("The FBI knows every woman I've ever fucked," Dominy once confessed to me.) "He didn't act surprised when I told him," Watt remembered. "I think he knew it was coming. We had decided to let him stay on a while longer so his pension could vest, and he acted grateful about that. I was in awe of this man. Everyone was. I was half his age. But he took the news very mildly. I can remember feeling very, very relieved."

When Dominy was himself relieved, he retired to his cattle ranch in the Shenandoah Valley, leaving his twenty-five-year Reclamation career behind him as if it had never occurred. "When I quit something," he said, "I really quit it." Once in a while he could be enticed into a lucrative consultancy—in 1981, he was hired by Egypt to help draft a solution to the grotesque drainage problems created by the Russian-built Aswan High Dam—and he drove to Capitol Hill now and then to testify against the likes of a Hells Canyon National Monument (which would preclude more dams on the lower Snake River); mostly, though, he preoccupied himself with enshrining his reputation and with his cows. In 1979, he was named Virginia Seed Stockman of the Year, a fitting title: he had been proclaimed the state's preeminent stud expert.

Dominy's reputation and legacy are more problematical—at least as complex as the man himself. In *Encounters with the Archdruid*, John McPhee portrays him as a commissioner who led Reclamation on a terrific binge, plugging western canyons as if they were so many basement leaks. His reputation, even today, is outsize; he is often talked

about in Washington, and in the conservationists' annals of villainy he remains a figure as large as, if not larger than, Ronald Reagan's Interior Secretary, the same James Watt. Watt, however, hopped around so much with his foot in his mouth that he didn't really have a chance to do much that the environmental movement regarded as awful. But Dominy presided over Glen Canyon Dam, over Trinity Dam, over a dozen other big dams, over the federal partnership with California in that state's own water project, which dammed the Feather River and allowed Los Angeles' explosive growth to continue, and with it its appetite for even more water. Those enamored of such giant engineering works were at least as sorry to see Dominy go as the conservationists were thrilled; no successor, they believed, could ever hope to equal him as a master tactician in Congress, as a fiercely committed believer in the cause of reclaiming the arid West.

On balance however, Floyd Dominy probably did the Bureau of Reclamation and the cause of water development a lot more harm than good. That, at least, is Daniel Dreyfus's assessment. Brilliant and hardheaded, the Bureau's house intellectual—and a native New Yorker—Dreyfus was the only person it had who could sit down with an influential Jewish Congressman from New York City, trade some urban banter and rabbi jokes, and convince him that he ought to vote for the Central Arizona Project. He left, in part, because of Floyd Dominy. "You could take so much of him," Dreyfus remembered one day in 1981, sitting in his office at the Senate Energy Committee, where he had gone to become staff director. "He got to be like a stuck record. The same damn stories about himself, the same fights with the same people over and over again. The mood of the country was changing, but Dominy refused to let the Bureau change. You got the feeling that you belonged to the Light Brigade." The loss of Dreyfus was especially ironic, because the chairman of the Senate Energy Committee was Henry Jackson, Dominy's one powerful enemy from a western state. In Dreyfus, Jackson had acquired the one person on earth who knew as much about the Bureau and its work as its commissioner.

Jim Casey, the Bureau's deputy chief of planning, worked under Dreyfus and also left in disgust. Like Dreyfus, Casey had become cynical about the whole Reclamation program, but he couldn't help retaining his loyalty to the Bureau. Once, in the early 1970s, when a friend sent a young engineering graduate over for job advice, Casey suggested that he apply at the Bureau, and the young man made a sour face. "He told me that the Bureau of Reclamation was a disgrace," Casey remembered. "And I got mad at him for saying that, but here was a guy fresh out of one of the top engineering schools—the kind of

guy who once would have loved to work for the Bureau—and he said it was nothing but a bunch of nature-wreckers out to waste the taxpayers' money. It was Floyd Dominy who gave it that reputation. You couldn't convince him that the Bureau's pigheadedness about things like Marble and Bridge Canyon dams was turning the whole country off. After he'd told me his Rainbow Bridge story for the seventh time and how he'd licked the conservationists, I said, 'Well, you won that one, but you haven't won too many others lately.' He said, 'What haven't I won?' And I said, 'Well, they licked you pretty good on Marble and Bridge Canyon.'

"You know what his answer was? 'My Secretary turned chickenshit on me.' The man was blind. He went completely blind."

These are mere opinions, but the record speaks for itself. The Central Arizona Project which Dominy finally managed to build is a medium-sized dwarf compared with the Pacific Southwest Water Plan he had planned, and he had to sacrifice the last years of his career to the effort to get it authorized. Today, few of the other grand projects conceived under him exist. There is no Devil's Canyon Dam on the Susitna River, no Texas Water Plan, no Auburn Dam, no Kellogg Reservoir, no English Ridge Dam, no Peripheral Canal, no additional dams in Hells Canyon on the Snake River, no Oahe and Garrison diversion projects. Dominy wanted to move the Bureau's activities into the eastern United States, because he came to believe that irrigation often makes better sense in wetter regions than in emphatically dry ones, and also because he wanted to invade the Corps of Engineers' domain in order to retaliate for the Corps having encroached on the Bureau in the West. But all of those plans—for irrigation projects in Louisiana, for a series of reservoirs in Appalachia set around new industrial towns—came to naught. The legacy of Floyd Dominy is not so much bricks and mortar as a reputation—a reputation and an attitude. The attitude is his—one of arrogant indifference to sweeping changes in the public mood—and it is probably the foremost obstacle in the Bureau of Reclamation's way as it tries to play a meaningful role in the future of the American West.

Actually, there is one more legacy, one of flesh and blood. In Dominy's office at his Shenandoah farm, next to his huge commissioner's desk, is a photograph of him with his son on a boat speeding across Lake Powell, arms around each other. Remove the film of thirty years and Floyd could be Charles Dominy's twin—they look that much alike. In the 1980s, Charles was the chief of the southeastern district of the Army Corps of Engineers. He was turning the Savannah River into a continuous reservoir, channelizing countless miles of meandering

streams and creeks, draining the last wild swamp and forest lands of the wet Southeast for soybean farms. He was also plotting to revive the cross-Florida barge canal—a casualty of the same administration that deposed his father.

A couple of hours earlier Dominy had been lambasting the Corps, saying it "has no conscience." As he saw his guest look at the photograph, however, he broke into a proud grin. He said, "That boy is going to be Chief of Engineers someday."

CHAPTER EIGHT

An American Nile (II)

Nineteen twenty-eight, the year the Hoover Dam legislation was passed, was a milestone year in Arizona in another sense. The population went past 400,000—the largest number of people who had lived there in approximately seven hundred years.

The original 400,000 Arizonans (that is an outside estimate; the number may have been somewhat smaller) were, for the most part, members of the Hohokam culture, a civilization that thrived uninterrupted near the confluence of the Gila, Salt, and Verde rivers for at least a thousand years, until about 1400, when it disappeared. The confluence of Arizona's only three rivers occurs in the hottest desert in North America, a huge bowl of sun now occupied by modern Phoenix and environs. Average summer temperature is 94 degrees; average annual rainfall is just over seven inches. There are far more hospitable places in the state, such as the cool Ponderosa-clad Mogollon Rim, but archaeologists surmise that the inhabitants of Arizona's higher and wetter regions drifted down to join the Hohokam in the latter days of their realm; something about the desert proved irresistibly attractive. The lure was probably food, which the Hohokam rarely lacked. They were the first purely agricultural culture in the Southwest, if not all of North America. Midden remains, well preserved by the desert's dryness and heat, suggest that the Hohokam rarely hunted, or even ate meat; their copious starch and vegetable diet was supplemented only occasionally by a bighorn sheep, antelope, raven, or kangaroo rat. Sometimes they ate sturgeon. That sturgeon bones have been